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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000826

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (LAWRENCE)

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SUBJECT: VISIT TO WIFE OF IMPRISONED LAWYER PROMPTS
POSITIVE REACTION AMONG CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: TUNIS 503

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary. At the invitation of university economics professor and PA contact Fedhi Jerbi, Polcouns April 6 visited the wife and family of Mohamad Abbou, the lawyer who was arrested March 1 for writing an online article harshly critical of President Ben Ali and his decision to invite Prime Minister Sharon to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in November. On August 26, 2004, he had also posted an article likening the treatment of political prisoners in Tunisia with the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal. Several civil society contacts said they were heartened to see mention of our visit on the opposition website Tunisnews. Simple public statements and actions leverage considerable influence here among civil society activists while drawing sometimes harsh reaction from the GOT. We should look with a strategic eye on how and when to use this tool to advance our agenda. End Summary.

12. (C) The visit took place at the Abbou residence, a sparse ground floor apartment in the south of Tunis. Present were Mrs. Samia Abbou, Jerbi and Rjiba Naziha (aka Neziha Rejiba Om Zied, the online journalist for al-Kalima, a web publication which is blocked here). Mrs. Abbou said she was "very happy" that a U.S. representative was visiting; "We feel very alone," she said, referring to the group (called the International Committee for the Freedom of Mohamed Abbou) of lawyers and activists who have banded together to demand the release of her husband.

13. (C) Mrs. Abbou said her husband had been arrested ("kidnapped" was the term she used in French) on the evening of March 1 at a cafe where he had been with a friend. She said that he did not resist arrest, since after the articles went online "he almost expected it." But she said he asked the security officials to ensure that a tank of oxygen that was in his car be delivered to his father, who was bedridden at home. Later, Mrs. Abbou said that she learned of the arrest when a security official did in fact come to her home that night with the oxygen; when she asked where her husband was, he responded "at a meeting, you should know," and disappeared with Abbou's car. (The car has never been returned.) Mrs. Abbou also went into some detail about the harsh treatment she received when she showed up the next day (with some of Abbou's colleagues) at court to hear the charges against her husband. According to her, when she approached the door to the court room, a security official pushed her to the floor and dragged her by one arm down the hallway, insulting her verbally. She was not able to see her husband for several weeks, since he was moved from Tunis to a prison in El Kef (about 200 km away) without her knowledge. On April 4, she did travel to El Kef and was able to see him briefly; she says he is physically in good condition "but they are torturing him mentally." While the discussion continued about the general human rights situation in Tunisia, Mrs. Abbou was clearly most concerned about what the U.S. Embassy could do to help secure her husband's release.

14. (C) On April 10, Jerbi posted a short article on the opposition website "Tunisnews" that made reference to the meeting and thanked the Embassy for its interest in the case "while regretting at the same time the almost deadly silence from diplomatic representatives of the EU countries." The appearance of this short article prompted four e-mails from contacts to the Embassy in support of the meeting and urging more visible signs of support from the U.S. for human rights activists. Neila Hachicha (protect) a contact trying to register a new political party and, while maintaining good relations with influential Tunisians also has close contact with the U.S. wrote: "what is important is that such a visit helps them understand that the U.S. cares about them, (and) they will stop insulting the U.S. and help people become more pro-American."

15. (C) COMMENT: What struck us about this event was not so much the plight of Mohamed Abbou, which is not unique, but the positive reaction of some civil society activists to the fact that a U.S. official visited his wife. We have often heard from long-time Embassy contacts that activists here watch keenly for "signals" from the U.S. and rely heavily on U.S. "protection" (which they claim comes by virtue of being

an Embassy contact) while challenging regime abuses. In terms of signals, even a brief mention of official U.S. disappointment on Tunisia's lack of reform is welcomed by the small activist community here, although they continue to urge more open criticism. Our public words and actions are magnified here, perhaps more than in other countries, because of the lack of reform movement and a muted civil society. For the same reason, perhaps, the GOT is especially sensitive to our public criticism. We should look with a strategic eye on how and when we can use this considerable tool to lend support to civil society and encourage them to assume their own role in promoting change.

HUDSON